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# Racism

## *Its Impact on the African American Family*

*Kenneth R. Greene*

Perhaps these times present the biggest crisis African Americans have faced since slavery. A series of economic upheavals, exacerbated by an epidemic of hard drugs and structural faults in the American economy, has undermined the social infrastructure of the African American family, creating sociosexual challenges of unprecedented magnitude.

This article is an effort to examine one cause, with its consequence, of this challenge that faces the African American family. We will look at white racism in America and its impact on the African American family. We will consider what the African American church and the white church can do to counter racism.

### **White Racism in America: The Cause**

Racism, the systematic subordination of one race, remains a major problem in the United States for the African American family. Racism is "any attitude, action or institutional structure which subordinates a person or group because of their color. . . . Racism is not just a matter of attitudes; actions and institutional structures can also be a form of racism."<sup>1</sup>

Racism involves having the power to carry out systematic discriminatory practices through the institutions of our society. Power plus prejudice equals racism. "In the United States at present, only Whites can be racists, since Whites dominate and control the institutions that create and enforce American cultural norms and values. . . . Blacks and other Third World peoples do not have access to the power to enforce any prejudices they may have, so they cannot, by definition, be racists."<sup>2</sup>

White people are in the majority in the country. Thus government, business, industry, union, religious, educational, and other kinds of institutions are almost always dominated by white people. When you combine power with racial discrimination, the result is racism. Nearly every major symptom of the malaise in society that the African American family faces is associated with problems of racism.

### **Economically Challenged**

Economics is one of the areas in which African American families have faced the greatest racism. Dr. Andrew Billingsley, a professor of sociology and Afro-American

studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, and the author of *Black Families in White America*, is an expert on the most critical need for the survival of the African American family. That need, he says, is jobs. "Most people don't make the direct connection between the family and unemployment," he says, adding that "the lack of a job is at the very core of the disintegration of the family."<sup>3</sup>

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The consequences of high unemployment or disproportionately high low-income employment have been devastating to the establishment and maintenance of stable families in African American communities. Young African American males who are unemployed and have little prospect of achieving economic stability all too frequently resort to exploitative relationships with women and detached relationships with their children. If the African American man cannot be a redemptive force in his own family, how can the church expect him to proclaim God's redemptive plan in the world? If the African American family is still basically struggling for the necessities of life, God's redemptive purpose in the world cannot be fully achieved.

### **Taking Charge**

The crisis in the African American family looms so large that many challenges seem beyond our control. Nevertheless, there is much that African Americans can do. Instead of resigning ourselves to victim status, it's time for African Americans to take action. William Raspberry, columnist for the *Washington Post*, wrote, "A myth has crippled African-America; the myth that racism is the

dominant influence in our lives. Two things flow from this racism-is-all myth. It puts the solution to our difficulties outside our control. And it encourages the fallacy that attacking racism as the source of our problems is the same as attacking our problems."<sup>4</sup> We don't deny that racism, and all its attendant evils, has thrown roadblocks into the path toward success for African Americans. But we challenge the attitude that we must wait for white America to get its moral act together before we can do anything about the crisis in our communities and families.

### **What Can the African American Church Do?**

The question now is, What can the African American church do to strengthen and maximize the potential of the African American family? Serious strategizing and planning for comprehensive economic development is a necessity. The watchword is *cooperation*.

If African American churches were to pool resources, churches could start businesses that would develop and create jobs for African Americans. If the African American church is going to sustain its freedom and the freedom of its people, it must be economically strong and independent. No other denominational expression of the Christian faith in America, be it sacred or secular, demonstrates so much economic dependence on outside assistance as does the African American church. Yet the fact is the African American church, with all of its wealth, is failing to support those institutions which provide education and health care for its people and is failing to utilize its economic resources to provide jobs for its constituents. The church must do more and more to embark on business ventures designed to breathe economic life into ailing African American communities. The African American church is the one institution that can help an economic turnaround happen. If not, then who?

### **What Can the White Church Do?**

Still and all, the racial challenges in America cannot be solved by the African American church alone. Racism in America is basically a white problem: white society created it and keeps it going through its institutions. If institutions reflect the attitudes and values of people, then the most ideal and humane way for the white church to eliminate institutional racism is to change its attitudes about African Americans and then restructure and reorganize its institutions so that they are no longer oppressive.



The white church cannot continue to allow itself to be supported by or give its sanction to major institutions of society that are oppressive.

"The New Racism," in contrast to redemption, points to the notion that the white community and white church were wrongly blamed for inequality in the first place. It does not seek redemption from the sin of racial injustice; it denies racial injustice as a persistent legacy and therefore an existing reality. Where there is no acknowledgment of sin, there can be no guilt or responsibility. The results can only be tragic. Our only hope lies in our ability to remember our history and maintain a sense of responsibility for it.

The present-day affirmative action approach to inequality of opportunity is but one of a myriad of African American initiatives that white Christians should support against white racist institutions. We desperately need the white church to support affirmative institutional practices that will upgrade and enhance opportunities for African American families in such areas as schools, housing, and employment. Spiritual and social needs cannot be separated. We minister to the whole person.

The white church can lend financial support and money for the building of African American community enterprises. It can stop investing its monies and resources in enterprises that directly or indirectly exploit the African American community or deny African Americans equal opportunity in employment, housing, and education.

White Christian leaders must speak out again racism from the pulpit and the classroom by developing biblical

literature that refutes racism and by using their influence to help change the attitudes of their members.

## Conclusion

Yes, the African American family has its challenges. Our challenges are also white America's challenges. If we were to take joint responsibility for cleaning up the racial mess, we could search for creative solutions that would expand opportunities for everyone. We must make decisions for both of us that strengthen *all* of our families, communities, and cities.

Our task is to make a decision—a decision to do what the Holy Spirit has already shown and taught us. Now he wants us to obey. He has taught us that there is only one way for racism to be erased from our hearts and our world: by his divine power.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Racism in America and How To Combat It* (Washington, 1970).

<sup>2</sup>National Education Association, *Education and Racism* (Washington, 1973).

<sup>3</sup>Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 167.

<sup>4</sup>William Raspberry, "The Myth That Is Crippling Black America," *Reader's Digest*, August 1990, 96–98.